

“We were born sick, you heard them say it”

Analysing communication and meaning via lyrics and music video of *Take Me to Church*

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Abstract

Although popular music has not been researched in the academic field to a great extent yet, popular music songs can convey socially and culturally relevant ideas and meanings and present problems of and critique to society. Inspired by frustration with organized religion as well as “gay propaganda” laws in Russia, *Take Me to Church* by Hozier criticizes both religious and political restriction of love and sexuality. This Bachelor’s Thesis examines the ways in which sexuality, homosexuality, homophobia, and oppression are approached and portrayed in the song lyrics and the music video of *Take Me to Church*. The focus of this thesis is the problematic relationship of sexuality and the Catholic Church, which is approached by combining the theoretical framework of lesbian and gay studies and queer theory and the ideological background of Christianity. Combining these approaches enables analysing communication and meaning of the lyrics and the music video while considering religious, social, and political aspects of them. In order to examine the song thoroughly, the lyrics and the music video are first analyzed separately, after which the analyses are tied together. Observing and analyzing the lyrics and the music video altogether expose a double meaning to the song, as well as themes such as oppression and the concept of otherness.

Tiivistelmä

Populäärimusiikin tutkiminen ja analysoiminen akateemisissa konteksteissa on tähän saakka ollut melko vähäistä. Siitä huolimatta pop-musiikiksi luokiteltavien kappaleiden sanoitukset voivat käsitellä yhteiskunnallisesti ja kulttuurillisesti olennaisia ja tärkeitä aiheita sekä tuoda esille ja kritisoida yhteiskuntaan liittyviä ongelmia. Hozier on *Take Me to Church* -kappaletta varten ottanut vaikutteita turhautumisesta osaltaan järjestäytynyttä uskontoa ja toisaalta Venäjän homopropagandalakia kohtaan, ja kritisoikin sekä uskonnon että politiikan avulla muodostettuja rajoituksia rakkautta ja seksuaalisuutta kohtaan. Tässä tutkimuksessa tarkkaillaan tapoja, joilla seksuaalisuutta, homoseksuaalisuutta, homofobiaa ja syrjintää määritellään ja kuvaillaan *Take Me to Church* -kappaleen sanoituksissa ja musiikkivideossa. Tutkimus keskittyy ongelmalliseen suhteeseen katolisen kirkon ja seksuaalisuuden välillä, ja tätä ongelmaa lähestytään yhdistämällä queer-tutkimuksen teoreettinen viitekehys sekä kristinuskon ideologia. Näiden lähestymistapojen yhdistäminen mahdollistaa kappaleen merkityksien analysoinnin ottaen huomioon niin uskonnollisen, yhteiskunnallisen kuin poliittisenkin aspektin. Jotta kappaleen tulkinta olisi mahdollisimman kattava, sanoitukset ja musiikkivideo analysoidaan ensin erillään, minkä jälkeen analyysit yhdistetään kokonaisuudeksi. Sanoitusten ja musiikkivideon tarkastelu kokonaisuutena paljastaa kappaleen kaksitulkintaisuuden. Lisäksi merkittäviä teemoja kappaleessa ovat syrjintä ja toiseuden käsite.

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1 Introduction

Popular music and pop song lyrics are easily deemed ‘meaningless’ and ‘shallow’. While this might be true in some cases, there are certainly also pop songs that address important ideas and subjects concerning, for instance, the problems of and critique to society and the darker side of human nature and behavior. This is not an entirely new phenomenon; several anti-war songs were released in response to the Vietnam War in the 1960s, *Like A Prayer* by Madonna caused quite a stir for its use of religious imagery in the 1980s, Green Day’s *American Idiot* addressed issues around the Iraq War and 9/11 in the early 2000s, and *This is America* by Childish Gambino (2018) deals with gun violence and systemic racism – just to name a few.

One of those pop songs, and the subject of this thesis, is the 2013 piece *Take Me to Church* by singer-songwriter Andrew Hozier-Byrne, better known by his stage name Hozier. *Take Me to Church* and its music video are emotional, thought-provoking as well as culturally and socially relevant narrations about the relationship between religion, society, love, and sexuality, and, perhaps most importantly, objections against homophobic attitudes and the hypocrisy of organized religion, especially the Catholic Church. The song has been described as, for instance, anti-religious. Discussing matters such as homophobia (and other difficult social phenomena) is important in order to raise awareness, reduce oppression and avoid the development of homophobic attitudes. In addition, as explained earlier, popular culture is easily accessible to, and consumed by, wide audiences, which is why it tends to affect and shape opinions and why it is important to examine how these subjects are discussed in popular culture.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine how homophobia and the problematic relationship between the Catholic Church and sexuality appear and are implemented in Hozier’s *Take Me to Church*. First, I will analyse the song lyrics and then the music video in as much detail as possible. Then the analyses of the two will be combined and the whole song (lyrics and music video) will be examined as a coherent whole. The song will be interpreted as a written text, and the musical elements will mostly be left out of the analysis; thereby the connection (or misconnection) between the lyrics and the music video will be the focus of attention.

2 Andrew Hozier-Byrne and ‘Take Me to Church’

Andrew Hozier-Byrne (March 17, 1990) is a singer-songwriter from Bray, Ireland. As an artist, he is known by his stage name Hozier, and he rose to prominence after releasing the song *Take Me to Church* on his debut single in September 2013. *Take Me to Church* went on to become a massive hit throughout Europe and eventually in the United States as well, earning multiple renowned nominations and awards. Shortly after the release of *Take Me to Church*, a music video was introduced as well to promote the song. It was released in September 2013 on YouTube, and it quickly went viral. As in 2021, the music video has reached 532 million views on YouTube. Hozier-Byrne claims that he was “essentially raised on blues music”, since his father was a blues musician when he was growing up (Shepherd, 2014). Thus, *Take Me to Church* is a mid-tempo soul song that is influenced by other African-American genres as well, such as folk and gospel.

While 78,3% of the Irish identify as Catholic, Hozier-Byrne received Quaker protestant upbringing. In an interview, he explained that his parents were Catholic, but that they chose to raise their children as Quakers (Skavlan, 2019). However, Hozier-Byrne attended Catholic secondary school and attended Catholic retreats, for instance (Smyth, 2014). It was particularly after the release of *Take Me to Church*, Hozier-Byrne was accused of atheism, to which he has replied in an interview with Rolling Stone by what could be interpreted as a position of agnosticism:

that term is associated with a belief that maybe there is nothing. I’m very comfortable not knowing. (Greene, 2015).

According to Hozier-Byrne, the lyrics to *Take Me to Church* were inspired by his frustration with organized religion and “particularly the Catholic Church’s history of mistreating gays and covering up child sexual abuse” (Greene, 2015). The lyrics tell a story of a romantic and sexual relationship using a great number of religious and biblical metaphors, which is why it has been criticized of anti-Christianity. Hozier-Byrne has specified that the lyrics are especially about the Catholic Church (Needham, 2015), but also noted that the song should not be interpreted as an attack on faith (Shepherd, 2014). He adds that “coming from Ireland, obviously, there’s a bit of a cultural hangover from the influence of the church” (Shepherd, 2014). “Growing up, I always say the hypocrisy of the Catholic church,” Hozier says. “The history speaks for itself and I grew incredibly frustrated and angry. I essentially just put that into my words.” (Greene, 2015). Thus, although the song is not necessarily an attack on faith, it is a critique of religious organization(s). As Hozier-Byrne has

explicitly stated “The damage done by the Church to the people of Ireland is completely irreparable, and the reparations are all too few” (Smyth, 2014).

In Hozier-Byrne’s own summary, *Take Me to Church* is “an assertion of self, reclaiming humanity back for something that is the most natural and worthwhile” (McBride, 2014). Whereas the song itself is about love and loving someone on a general level, the music video concentrates on homosexuality and homophobia: it follows a same-sex couple’s romantic relationship and portrays a violent homophobic altercation. The events of the music video take place in Russia, and they parallel the song lyrics and are a critique of state oppression and homophobia in Russia. Hozier-Byrne explains that he had been “following what was going on in Russia, where far-Right groups were doing these organised attacks, filming them and putting them on social media.” (Smyth, 2014). In a way, similar systematic oppression happens all over the world, whether it is motivated by religion or state and politics. Thus, *Take Me to Church* song lyrics and music video bring different types of oppression together.

3 Theoretical background and Methodology

The material for this thesis consists of the lyrics and the music video of Hozier-Byrne’s song *Take Me to Church*. The primary data was gathered by observing: listening to the song, reading the lyrics, and watching the music video. In addition, further sources including interviews with Hozier-Byrne in both written and video forms was gathered from online sources.

I have taken a qualitative approach to literary analysis of both the song lyrics and the music video of Hozier-Byrne’s *Take Me to Church*. To perform the analysis, I have combined the theoretical framework of lesbian and gay studies and queer theory and the ideological background of Christianity and particularly of the Catholic Church. Combining these approaches enables observing and interpreting the ways in which sexuality, homosexuality, and homophobia appear in *Take Me to Church*. Thus, the literary analysis on the data is conducted with the help of and through the lens of Queer theory, as well as familiarizing myself with the teachings of the Catholic Church and, to an extent, the state politics in Russia.

Studying popular music in academic settings is a new phenomenon, which is why there is no coherent theory nor methodology for analysing pop music. Music analysis and popular music have, indeed,

been brought together in the last few years, but not “at sufficient length and in sufficient detail” (Moore, 2012, p. 2). According to Eckstein, the reason behind the fact that popular music and especially popular music lyrics have not been academically studied is that there is a “stubborn bias towards the written word and a persistent refusal to work with a concept of ‘embodied’ language” (2010, p. 14). Because of this lack of analysis of pop song lyrics, there seems to be no concordant theory on how song lyrics should be analysed. Eckstein, for instance, argues that “lyrics and poetry are similar; they both employ verbal language, often using characteristic rhetorical and stylistic devices” (2010, p. 10), but also goes on to say that “lyrics are not poetry, and their study therefore requires a different set of analytical tools from that which is conventionally applied to poetry” (2010, p. 23). Moore, on the other hand, explains that even though poetry and song lyrics are not the same and they should not be confused with one another, “some technical poetic devices can be found in lyrics, and can add a certain expressive quality” (2012, pp. 113). Based on this finding, it could be argued that even if poetry analysis *per se* cannot and should not be directly applied to song lyrics analysis, some poetic devices surely appear in song lyrics, and they can be analysed as such. Griffiths suggests that “we stop thinking that the words in pop songs *are* poems, and begin to say that they are *like* poetry” (2003, p. 42).

In this thesis, it is presumed that song lyrics can be analysed in a similar, although not the same, manner and by using similar tools as are used in poetry. Poetic devices that can be found in popular music are, for instance, rhyme (Griffiths even argues that “rhyme appears to be so central in pop music that it is surely a surprise that there is little systematic discussion” (2003, pp. 50)), alliteration, repetition, puns, clichés, and similes and metaphors (Moore, 2012, pp. 113). Figurative language, similes and metaphors can be found in Hozier’s *Take Me to Church* throughout the song and they will be analysed later.

3.1 Lesbian and gay studies and Queer theory

Lesbian and gay studies originated as an academic response to social and political movements in the 1960s and 1970s. It emerged in the context of specific political debates concerning, for instance, “commitment to sexual justice, greater legal and social equality for non-heterosexual people, and in a willingness to be identified as lesbian or gay in the academy” (Sandfort, T., Schuyf, J., Duyvendak, J. W. & Weeks, J., 2000, p. 4). As Kirsch (2000) explains, the political and social turmoil in the 1960s lead to “global questioning of dominance by peoples struggling for their voices to be heard” (para.

7). For instance, women, people of colour as well as non-heterosexual people began opposing the 'leadership' that was predominantly white and male (para. 7).

Although a vast amount of work and study have been produced in the field of gay and lesbian studies since the 1970s, "lesbian and gay studies means many things to people, at different times, in different countries" (Sandfort et al, 2000, p. 2). In fact, it is widely accepted that there is no single theoretical core nor methodology to gay and lesbian studies (p. 3). There is also diversity in the objects of gay and lesbian studies. However, Sandfort et al. point out that

The object of study has to a large extent often been the lives of lesbian and gay people themselves: identities, experience of oppression, struggles for recognition, through history and in literature and so on. (2000, p. 2)

However, at its core, gay and lesbian studies is a field that concerns both homosexual and heterosexual experiences: it "must be about the recognition of the need to learn to live with differences and to find ways of resolving differences in dialogue with one another in an open and democratic fashion" (Sandfort et al., 2000, p. 4). In addition, it questions sexual orthodoxy and challenges heteronormativity and historical privileging of heterosexuality (p. 5). All in all, gay and lesbian studies create a space of debate for analysis and negotiation as well as, perhaps most importantly, "for finding common cause" (p. 10) for people of different sexual orientations.

More recently, after the political and social turmoil that gay and lesbian studies emerged from in the 1970s, "queer theory came to gain prominence in university halls and classrooms during the 1980s and 1990s" (Kirsch, 2000, para 5). Taking the dialogue between heteronormativity and homosexuality that gay and lesbian studies presented even further, queer theory and queer studies have "questioned the fixity of sexual and gender boundaries, and offered a picture of sexual categories as fluid and changeable" (Sandfort et al., 2000, p. 2). As Barry (2009) explains it, lesbian and gay studies deals with a post-structuralist approach of two different terms or concepts that are theoretically opposite to each other, a 'binary opposition', and aims to deconstruct it (p. 138). In this case, the binary opposition is heterosexual/homosexual, and Barry argues that "the distinction of paired opposites is not absolute" and that "it is possible to reverse the hierarchy in such pairs" (p. 138). Thus, the binary opposition heterosexual/homosexual is unstable.

Both lesbian and gay studies as well as queer theory have had a remarkable impact on literary and cultural studies. For instance, Harpelin (2003) argues that especially queer theory has effectively "re-opened the question of the relations between sexuality and gender", "supported non-normative

expressions of gender and sexuality, encouraging both theoretical and political resistance to normalization”, “underwritten a number of crucial theoretical critiques of homophobia and heterosexism” and so on (p. 341). It could be argued that queer theory is one tool to discuss and normalize non-heterosexuality and different gender identities, to raise awareness of issues related to them, to reduce oppression and to construct and create a more inclusive social, cultural, and political environment.

Especially the music video for *Take Me to Church* deals with homosexuality and homophobia, which is why the approaches of lesbian and gay studies and queer theory are applicable in the analysis. The music video portrays an example of homophobia and what homosexual individuals may encounter in their daily lives only because of their sexuality, which raises awareness surrounding these issues. Addressing homophobia and homophobic attitudes in popular culture settings increases visibility and representation of non-heterosexuality, which, in turn, may assist in achieving a greater acceptance of it.

3.2 Christianity and sexuality

The relationships between different religions and sexuality range widely. In addition, religions, and religious views within them, may manifest themselves in different cultural settings. However, especially in Abrahamic religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, sex and sexuality tend to traditionally be highly indoctrinated and restricted and often any deviance in sexualities and sexual actions are deemed ‘sinful’. In *Take Me to Church* many of these traditions and restrictions are challenged.

In terms of conducting a thorough analysis on how the lyrics of Hozier-Byrne’s *Take Me to Church* discuss the relationship between the Catholic Church and sexuality, it is crucial to examine the Catholic theology of sexuality. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992), promulgated by Pope John Paul II, summarizes the beliefs of the Catholic Church, including the Catholic views towards sexuality and homosexuality. In short, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* provides information on and answers to how the Catholic faithful are expected to express their religion in their day-to-day lives.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* encourages chastity, which is a ‘moral virtue’ as well as “a gift from God, a grace, a fruit of spiritual effort” (2345). It is determined more precisely as such:

Chastity means the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being. Sexuality, in which man's belonging to the bodily and biological world is expressed, becomes personal and truly human when it is integrated into the relationship of one person to another, in the complete and lifelong mutual gift of a man and a woman. (2337)

A few conclusions can be derived from this excerpt. First, humanity and sexuality are inseparable, thus sex and sexuality are not inherently 'bad' nor reprehensible per se, since human was created to be 'good'. However, there are restrictions on the manners in which sexuality should be presented for it to be acceptable. More specifically, since the procreative dimension of sexuality is the foundation of sexual relations, sexuality should only be expressed in a matrimony between a man and a woman. In addition, one should be able to resist their sexual urges although they are a natural and inseparable part of humanity:

Man's dignity therefore requires him to act out of conscious and free choice, [...] and not by blind impulses in himself or by mere external constraint. Man gains such dignity when, ridding himself of all slavery to the passions... (2339).

Thus, according to the *Catechismus of the Catholic Church*, sexuality can be an integral part of a relationship between a human and God if it is practiced 'correctly'. Although it is natural for humans to have sexual urges, or 'impulses' and 'passions', according to Catholic theology, one should not give into those urges, but rather restrain them in accordance with the prescriptions of the religion.

The *Catechismus of the Catholic Church* provides a list of offenses to chastity, first of which is lust, "disordered desire for or inordinate enjoyment of sexual pleasure" (2351). Another offense to chastity is masturbation, which is "an intrinsically and gravely disordered action" (2352). In short, sexual pleasure should not be sought for itself only, but rather for its actual procreative purposes in a matrimony; "the deliberate use of the sexual faculty, for whatever reason, outside of marriage is essentially contrary to its purpose" (2352). Alongside lust and masturbation, pornography is viewed as a "grave offense" to chastity (2354); pornography, as well as prostitution, reduce the participants to "instrument(s) of sexual pleasure" (2355) so that they become objects of "base pleasure and illicit profit for others" (2354). In addition, fornication is listed as an offense to chastity, for sexual activities should not take place between individuals outside of marriage (2353), which also deems pre-marital sex as an offense. Rape (2356) is listed as an offense to chastity in the *Catechismus of the Catholic Church* as well.

The Catholic church and its teachings are well-known for their negative attitudes towards homosexuality and, especially, homosexual encounters, and they are often accused of homophobia. The *Catechismus of the Catholic Church* does not view homosexual orientation or homosexual tendencies unacceptable or sinful, but homosexual acts are strictly disapproved, as they are “acts of grave depravity” and “intrinsically disordered” (2357). Thus, according to the *Catechismus*, simply being homosexual is not a sin, but participating in and practicing homosexual activities is “contrary to natural law” and cannot be accepted under any circumstances. However, the *Catechismus* encourages to the acceptance of people with ‘homosexual tendencies’, and any discrimination towards them is prohibited (2358). Homosexual individuals are, nevertheless, expected to restrain themselves from participating in homosexual encounters and to strive for the Catholic way of life – heterosexuality. They are “called to chastity” by the church, and “by prayer and sacramental grace, they can and should gradually and resolutely approach Christian perfection” (2359).

In a way, it could be argued that Catholicism demands homosexual Catholics to celibacy or to try to ‘turn heterosexual’ in pursuance of being fully accepted by the church. In short, homosexuality is viewed as an unnatural disorder or condition, of which individuals should be ‘cured’.

4 Analysis

In this section I will perform an analysis on the material. In subsection 4.1, the song lyrics of *Take Me to Church* will be analysed in parts. For the sake of analysing the lyrics thoroughly, the possible meanings behind the metaphors in the song must first be uncovered and decoded. The analysis aims to unravel these implicit meanings and how they relate to culture and the society. In the subsection 4.2, the music video will be analysed in a similar manner, and, ultimately, in subsection 4.3 the results of the analyses will be compared, and their relations and how the song lyrics and the music video complement each other will be analysed.

4.1 Song lyrics

The song structure in Hozier’s *Take Me to Church* is traditional in and typical of popular music songs. Broken into pieces, it consists of verse, pre-chorus, chorus, and bridge. The same pattern is repeated until the end of the second chorus, after which the song moves on to the bridge. In the end, the chorus is repeated.

4.1.1 Verses 1-2

The whole first verse consists of 9 lines. It can be further divided into two 4-line sections, which are similar to each other. The first verse begins:

My lover's got humor
She's the giggle at a funeral
Knows everybody's disapproval
I should've worshiped her sooner

The first line seems to refer to a heterosexual relationship and romance - the male singer's 'lover' is referred to using 'she/her' pronouns. The singer then goes on to refer to his lover as a giggle at a funeral, which indicates that 'the lover' is somehow inappropriate, since showing emotions such as laughter is not appropriate in a serious setting such as a funeral. 'Giggle at a funeral' can also be interpreted as a disrespectful or 'out-of-place' act. In addition, mentioning a funeral can be interpreted as the first reference to organized religion. Their relationship is described to be disapproved by 'everybody'; it seems that the singer refers to a wide group of people – everybody else but the singer and his 'lover'. 'The others' are, nonetheless, left impersonal. The fourth line suggests that although the singer now worships his 'lover', this has not always been the case. 'Worship' is quite a strong word, which refers to a powerful bond, belief, and admiration towards someone or something. The singer seems to set his lover up as a 'pagan-god' of sort, whom he wishes to worship rather than any other god, paralleling the Christian view of one God.

If the Heavens ever did speak
She is the last true mouthpiece
Every Sunday's getting more bleak
A fresh poison each week

The first line of the next part is a clear reference to religion. However, the singer presents a sort of a suspicion and doubt towards religion and the Bible; it could be argued that he juxtaposes God with 'Heaven' and to the belief that God has spoken to mankind through prophets, but starts his sentence with the word "if". He does not seem certain whether 'the Heavens' or God have ever spoken or not, although he might have been taught that they have. As the 'word of God' usually refers to the Bible, the singer, then, places doubt on the teachings of Christianity.

The singer then moves on to describe his lover as the 'last true mouthpiece' of God. All things considered, the singer seems to appreciate and trust his 'lover's' words and opinions rather than the church's or 'the Heaven's'. The singer moves on to describe every Sunday as 'more bleak', as if one Sunday after another was gradually depressing and gloomy. Mentioning Sunday, rather than any other

weekday, is another reference to religion. In the western tradition, Sunday is usually a day of rest, and for devoted Christians it is known as the Lord's Day. In addition, in the western world, Sunday is often associated with attending church service. It seems that the singer describes the Lord's Day and the weekly church service as 'bleak'. This interpretation suggests that the next line refers to these weekly services and the teachings of them as poisonous and somewhat destructive to the singer.

I refer to the next part as pre-chorus for it is repeated a few times:

We were born sick, you heard them say it

The singer refers to himself and some other person or persons as "we". At first glance, it would seem that he is referring to himself and his 'lover', but the concept of 'the lover' in the song might not be unambiguous. He also refers to a group of people, 'them', a group he does not belong to. There seems to be a juxtaposition between 'we' and 'them', but, again, the participants in neither of the groups are specified.

The song moves on to the second verse, which consists of 7 lines in total:

My church offers no absolutes
She tells me 'worship in the bedroom'
The only heaven I'll be sent to
Is when I'm alone with you

The first line seems to be the first unambiguous reference to religion, as the singer talks about his church. He claims that his church does not give him complete answers to his questions. His church, however, might either mean his actual, physical church or, perhaps more likely, his newly found faith and religion in his lover. Since the singer has not spoken about religion or his church in positive terms in the song, it would make sense that he is now talking about a different 'church' than before. If 'church' is a metaphor to the lover he is talking about, the line would mean that his new 'religion' is not as restrictive as, for instance, Christianity.

'She' encourages him to 'worship in the bedroom'. It could be argued that 'she', once again, refers to the singer's lover. 'Bedroom', in this sense, might be a reference to two things; first, bedroom refers to intimacy and sexuality between individuals, which traditionally takes place in the bedroom. This implies that 'worshipping', might be a reference to the actions in their relationship and, ultimately, to sex. However, 'worshipping in the bedroom' might also implicate that the 'worshipping' should happen 'behind closed doors'. It could be argued that both interpretations should be considered as one; the worshipping (sex, sexuality, and intimacy) should happen

somewhere private and 'hidden'. Because of the fact that in the first verse the singer mentioned 'everybody's disapproval', this makes sense - there is something unconventional and inappropriate in the singer's 'lover' and in the way the singer 'worships'. The next two lines seem obvious enough: the time the singer spends with his 'lover' is heavenly, and the time spent with 'the lover' is everything he could hope for. He does not long for anything else, not now, or in the afterlife. The singer also seems to think that is the only Heaven he will have access to; he seems to think that he will not be permitted in the Christian 'heaven'.

The song moves on to another pre-chorus:

I was born sick, but I love it
Command me to be well
Amen, Amen, Amen

This time the singer only refers to himself as he described himself as 'sick', and, adds that despite the opinions of the others, he loves himself and his 'sickness'. Being 'born sick' might be a metaphor for several things. Considering the nature of the song and the references to sex and sexuality, it could be said that being born 'sick' refers to Christianity's attitudes towards sexuality. Christianity, and especially the Catholic Church, has traditionally been conservative when it comes to sex and sexuality; they are often associated with shame and, most importantly, sin. It seems that the singer says that according to the Church, he was born sick because of his sexuality and sexual desires. On the other hand, sexuality is a natural part of being human. He loves 'love', sexuality, and sex, regardless of the Church's teachings.

The pre-chorus functions also as a reference to Elizabethan dramatist Fulke Greville's 1554 poem *Chorus Sacerdotum*. Greville's poem recites that mankind was "created sick, commanded to be sound", which is a reference to 'the Original sin' - each of us is created responsible for the sin Adam and Eve committed and therefore created with this 'sickness'. We are 'commanded to be sound', meaning that each individual, in order to be spared, needs to repent and deliberately act against their sinful nature. *Take Me to Church* refers to this famous poem and, therefore, to the Original sin. In fact, the teachings of the Catholic Church declare sex and sexuality to be a natural part of humanity but encourage chastity: people should fight their sexual urges and passions.

Throughout the song, there are references to the 'inappropriate' nature of the singer's 'lover' and to his sex life. Considering this fact, it could be said that the song is about the conservative attitudes towards sex and sexuality set by institutions such as the Catholic Church. However, this interpretation

could (and perhaps should be) considered even further. Especially the Catholic Church has traditionally been known for their negative stance on homosexuality, and homosexuality is sometimes thought of as not only sinful, but also as a 'disease'. However, similar attitudes can be seen outside the concept of religion, too. For instance, in some parts of the world, homosexuality is still repressed by judicial mechanisms, or even proscribed under penalty of death. Hence, being 'born sick' could refer to being homosexual, same-sex desire, and engaging in homosexual acts. However, it is not clearly stated in the lyrics, and the setting in which a male singer is addressing a female lover implies a heterosexual relationship.

The singer concludes the second pre-chorus as prayers are traditionally concluded, in a declaration of affirmation 'amen'. This declaration is meant to emphasise his words and message even more, and it simultaneously functions as a reminder of the singer's newly found faith and devotion to his 'lover'.

4.1.2 Chorus

The next part of the song to be analysed is the chorus. The chorus, as whole, is 10 lines long, and it consists of two 5-line stanzas. The same lines are repeated twice.

Take me to church
I'll worship like a dog at the shrine of your lies
I'll tell you my sins and you can sharpen your knife
Offer me that deathless death
Good God, let me give you my life
Take me to church
I'll worship like a dog at the shrine of your lies
I'll tell you my sins and you can sharpen your knife
Offer me that deathless death
Good God, let me give you my life

As the song has developed, it could be argued that the story seems to be about the singer leaving behind his old 'religion', the one he has been taught to, and 'converting' to a new one. The chorus can be read in a way that the singer might address the old religion and protest its unfairness (*'I'll tell you my sins and you can sharpen your knife'*) – the singer might be referring to and addressing the Catholic tradition of confession and accusing it of hypocrisy as well as revealing its irony. He implies that even when people confess their sins, they are still being judged by the Catholic Church.

The chorus starts with the singer requesting someone to take him to 'church'. As explained before, 'church' in this sense does not necessarily refer to any physical place, but perhaps rather to an

emotional state of sort. ‘Church’ could, for instance, mean pleasure; in that case the line could be interpreted as the singer simply asking for someone to take him to bed. In any case, if interpreted in a similar manner as before, ‘church’ seems to be a metaphor for engaging in a sexual act. The singer continues by comparing himself to ‘a dog’; dogs are often associated with altruistic loyalty towards their master. Thus, worshipping ‘like a dog’ could imply that the singer is extremely devoted to someone he is singing to, perhaps to the point of stupidity. Nonetheless, the next words might affect the meaning.

In this context the ‘church’ can also mean the actual church. In that case the message would seem easier to comprehend; the singer is, again, addressing the Christian tradition of confession and absolution and, perhaps especially, the Catholic Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. He might mean that, in his opinion, the church belittles or demeans their attendants and the ‘believers’ - they serve their ‘masters’ as if they were ‘dogs’. ‘Shrine of [...] lies’ is an attack towards the doctrines of Christianity; the singer calls their teachings ‘lies’, of which their shrines are made. The church teaches their congregants to be ashamed of their sins and, in fact, of themselves. However, religious people accept their status as ‘inferiors’ and ‘sinners’, and dedicate their lives to repentance, although they can never truly be completely ‘sinless’. In the Catholic Church, the only way to be freed from sin is through the Sacrament of Penance, even if it is the Christian doctrines that make them sinful in the first place. In addition, it could be argued that since we were all ‘created sick’, the priest whom the confessions are addressed to was ‘created sick’ as well. The next line about ‘sharpening a knife’ could refer to this hypocrisy as well as to the belittlement of the inferior ‘laymen’.

The singer, then, begs for ‘the deathless death’. In Christian doctrines, ‘deathless death’ means the salvation and, ultimately, the eternal life that every Christian is promised, and which is made possible by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He then continues to offer his ‘God’ his life; interpreting this in Christian terms might mean suffering a martyr death, *i.e.*, offering one’s life for ‘the truth’. In exchange for his martyr death, the singer would be granted the gift of eternal life or ‘deathless death’. However, in an interview for the Irish Times, Hozier-Byrne has described his personal opinions and thoughts about ‘deathless death’ as such:

“I found the experience of falling in love or being in love was a death, a death of everything. You kind of watch yourself die in a wonderful way, and you experience for the briefest moment – if you see yourself for a moment through their eyes – everything you believed about yourself gone. In a death-and-rebirth sense.” (Mullally, 2013)

Thus, the ‘deathless death’ and the desire to offer one’s life for ‘God’ might simply be a metaphor for love, and, considering the overall message of the song, for intimacy and sex. The singer wishes to offer his ‘lover’ everything he has and refers to this devotion as ‘deathless death’. He believes that his ‘lover’ is capable of offering him ‘death-and-rebirth’. However, it could be argued that there is another metaphor as well; in French, the expression *la petite mort*, which translates to ‘a small death’ is a euphemism for an orgasm. In that sense, the line could be read as the singer’s request for his partner to fulfill his desires.

4.1.3 Verses 3-4

After the first chorus, the song goes back to the verse. The music, *i.e.*, instruments, remain the same but the melody and the vocals are expressed in a more distinct manner. The structure is somewhat similar in the first part of the second verse, but the second part sets a new course both narratively and musically.

If I'm a pagan of the good times
My lover's the sunlight
To keep the goddess on my side
She demands a sacrifice

The second verse shifts the attention from Christianity that was discussed in the first verse to the singer’s newly found ‘religion’. This new religion, or his ‘lover’, is referred to as paganism - the singer seems to have abandoned Christianity. However, he starts the first line with the word ‘if’, which would imply that he is still in some sort of doubt - he does not seem to think that he is, in fact, a pagan, but realises that ‘others’ see him as that, and he is challenging that idea. Referring to his ‘lover’ as sunlight might derive from the fact that many ‘pagan’ religions worship the sun (or other celestial objects or, for instance, natural phenomena) rather than a personal God. Thus, if he indeed is a ‘heathen’, then his ‘lover’ is the ‘deity’ of his, someone or something with a divine nature.

The next part, however, is slightly peculiar. If ‘the Goddess’ is the same entity that has been addressed before throughout the song as ‘she’ or ‘the lover’, it seems weird that she demands a sacrifice from him. The line, however, seems to be, again, a reference to paganism. ‘Sacrifice’ is often associated with paganism, as in animal sacrifice or even human sacrifice: offering one’s life for a divine being as an act of worship. Therefore, the line implies that if a ‘sacrifice’ of some sort is not given and fulfilled, ‘the Goddess’ might leave his side. It has already been stated before that ‘she does not offer

absolutes', which was interpreted as flexibility and being less restrictive than Christianity; 'demanding' such sacrifice does not seem nonrestrictive. Of course, the 'lover' does not demand an actual life to be sacrificed, but it is rather a metaphor; staying in a relationship demands a lot of work and commitment, and sometimes compromises. Another possible interpretation would be that this relationship is somewhat controlling and unhealthy, as if the 'lover' constantly requested 'too much' from the singer. Nonetheless, since the tone in which the 'lover' has been spoken about throughout the song is favorable and affectionate, it would seem more plausible that the line is, in fact, about working hard for the good of their relationship.

Another way to interpret the 'sacrifice' is that the sacrifice in question could be letting go of the old religion. Although perhaps restrictive and hypocritical, it might have been a substantial part of the singer's life, and it might be difficult to give up on deep-rooted beliefs, ideas, and traditions.

The song then moves on to the next verse:

Drain the whole sea
Get something shiny
Something meaty for the main course

The first lines might be a continuum for the first verse and refer to the demanded 'sacrifice'. It seems more plausible that 'draining the sea' refers to the protagonist himself; perhaps he is urged to reflect and explore himself to the core and to let go of the expectations of others and the Church, which is how he will find 'something shiny', something beautiful and worthy of the goddess' love. On the other hand, it could refer to something that the Catholic Church has been accused of as well: greed. The Catholic Church is one of the wealthiest organizations in the world, but its finances are largely kept a secret. However, a lot of its funds have been collected as donations from other organizations and from private people. Thus, 'something shiny' and 'something meaty' could also be ways of accusing the Catholic Church of both greed and, again, hypocrisy.

The verse continues:

That's a fine-looking high horse
What you got in the stable?
We've a lot of starving faithful
That looks tasty
That looks plenty
This is hungry work

The idiom of high horse is a common way to express that someone is acting self-righteously and arrogantly or thinking that they are superior to others. In this case, it could mean that from the singer's point of view, the Catholic Church as well as religious people in general are sitting on their high horses, looking down at the non-religious. He continues the wordplay on horses by wondering what else there is in the 'stable', which might suggest that he believes that there are secrets or 'skeletons in the closet' that people on high horses may be hiding. Once again, it could be interpreted as an accusation of hypocrisy.

Mentioning the 'starving faithful' can be interpreted in a several ways. First, it could be another pique at the greed discussed before. In the most literal sense, although the wealth of the Catholic Church is enormous, many of the faithful live in poverty. The line 'This is hungry work' could suggest that as well: it points out the irony of giving the faith everything you have but not receiving much in return. However, the phrase could also be derived back to sex and sexuality, in which case the 'starving faithful' could refer to the stigmatization of intimacy and sex and to the inability to express them.

After the second chorus, the D part, or the bridge, is presented:

No masters or kings when the ritual begins
There is no sweeter innocence than our gentle sin
In the madness and soil of that sad earthly scene
Only then I am human
Only then I am clean
Amen, Amen, Amen

As explained before, the 'church' in the song might be a metaphor for sex. If that is the case, then 'the ritual' seems to refer to sexual act as well, which takes place in their own 'church' – the bedroom, for instance. However, in that ritual, there are 'no masters or kings': none of the participants are superior to one another and they engage in the ritual as equals. In addition, there is no one to judge them. This parallels the rituals or sacraments performed within organized religions that are based on the worship of something or someone, making the participants inferior to the priest or God, whereas the relationship and the ritual between the singer and his lover is based on equality, consensus, and mutual respect.

Interestingly, the next line contrasts 'sin' with 'innocence'. The singer claims that the sin, in other words sex, he and his lover commit together is actually pure and innocent and describes it as 'gentle'. 'Gentle sin', in fact, is a reference to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, another story of both inconvenient and forbidden love. As per the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, engaging in

premarital and deviant sexual activities are considered a sin, the singer seems to present a question: how can something as beautiful as love be a sin? In addition, if sexuality is inherently a part of human nature, how could it be wrong or considered sodomy?

The next part seems to, possibly ironically, describe the sex as a ‘sad earthly scene’. Perhaps it is ‘sad’ to others, and ‘earthly’ because it is natural and mundane, not dependent on religion or God. The singer concludes that only in this setting is he actually ‘clean’, even if the teachings of the Catholic Church claim the opposite. In addition, the singer claims that in that scene he is only ‘human’, as well; it could be argued that this emphasizes the inevitable relationship between humanity and sexuality, and perhaps implies that restricting sexuality restricts him as well. He cannot be whole if that part of him is removed.

4.2 Music video

Two weeks after the release of *Take Me to Church*, a music video was released to accompany it on September 25, 2013, and the music video went viral quickly; according to Hozier-Byrne, the video was gaining 10,000 views an hour (Greene, 2015). As in October 2021, it is up to almost 525 million views on YouTube. The music video was made in collaboration between Andrew Hozier-Byrne and a small Irish production company Feel Good Lost.

The music video for *Take Me to Church* is 4 minutes and 16 seconds long and completely shot in greyscale. Although it was filmed in Cork, Ireland, the events in the video take place in Russia. According to Hozier-Byrne himself, the music video references to “Russian anti-gay propaganda laws” which lead to “series of attacks and increase of attacks [against LGBTQ+ community] by far-right gangs and, essentially, neo-Nazi gangs” (CBS News, 2015). Briefly, the music video follows a same-sex couple of two men who, as the video advances, face homophobic attitudes, discrimination, and, ultimately, violence. In the following sections, the music video for *Take Me to Church* will be analysed in detail. The goal of the analysis is to find out how the themes that have been discussed in the song lyrics appear in the video, how the same-sex couple is perceived in the video, and, ultimately, how the video manages to bring forth the story and the hardships the couple faces. The goal will be pursued with the help of still images of the music video.

The music video for *Take Me to Church* is narrative-based and contains no artistic representation or performance. The characters in the music video are a same-sex couple and a group of other men that

form a ‘gang’ of sort. The gang members are portrayed as hostile towards the couple and especially towards one of the gay men – the other does not suffer physical violence but rather takes the role of a spectator of the events. The reason for the gang’s hostility seems to be the couple’s sexual orientation. The video builds up gradually, exhibiting different scenes that ultimately lead to a physical confrontation between the gang members and one of the homosexual men.

The video starts with a shot of a campfire where something can be seen burning. However, at this point, the object is not specified. Throughout the video, there are jump shots between different moments of time and settings, and it can be seen immediately in the beginning; the setting changes from the campfire to a man (who will be referred to as “man 1” later on) who is running. His facial expression is startled and his gestures are hasty (Figure 1).



Figure 1

The camera jumps to another man (“man 2”) who is riding a bike in a calm manner, at least in comparison to man 1, and then back to the campfire. The difference between their energies indicate that the scenes do not happen at the same time. At this point, there is no portrayed relationship between the two men. Next shot portrays man 1 frantically searching for and finding a box, which he reaches for on a shelf (Figure 2). He locks the box with large chains (Figure 3) and, in the next scene, buries it under the ground (Figure 4). In the next shot the campfire is shown again and this time the spectator may now recognize that the object in the fire is, in fact, the same box that was locked and buried under the ground by man 1 earlier (Figure 5).



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

The contents of the box are not shown but considering the rushed and the panicked expressions of man 1, it could be argued that the box contains something important; he makes the effort to not only hide the box and its' content, but also to lock the box tightly before it to make sure that it does not open accidentally or that no one can open it even if it was found. Thus, the box contains something of great importance and, in addition, something the man wishes to keep a secret from others.

The next scene jumps back to man 2 who is greeted by man 1. This is the first scene in which the two men are shown to have a close relationship with each other; they embrace each other tightly and seem genuinely delighted to see each other (Figure 6).



Figure 6

In comparison to the earlier scenes, their behavior and expressions are calm and natural, which implies that their encounter takes place in different moment of time, most likely before the events that were portrayed earlier in the video. Thus, the events of the music video do not happen in a chronological order. The next scenes show the men spending time together in places that seem isolated and secluded. However, another man is portrayed to be observing them in distance (Figure 7). There is no interaction between them, and it seems that the men do not notice him. The man's expression is ambiguous (Figure 8), but he seems displeased, suspicious, disappointed, irritated, judgmental, and/or upset with the sight of the two men.



Figure 2



Figure 8

The two of them move on and seem to head for a place where there are no other people around. They sit next to a river where they are shown to share an affectionate kiss; this is the first scene that reveals that the men are, in fact, a same-sex couple (Figure 9).



Figure 9

Once knowing that they are a couple, some of the events that happened in the earlier parts of the music video can be analysed further. For instance, the couple seemed to be seeking for a secluded place on purpose; they travelled a relatively long way before they shared the kiss, which implies that their relationship is a secret. The same conclusion can be drawn from the reaction of the third man. He seemed displeased with what he was seeing, which can be explained by the couple's sexuality. Although he was not portrayed to be present when their kiss occurred, he might have followed the couple and witnessed the events, or he might have known already about the couple. Either way, it can be argued that the reason behind the third man's discontent reaction could quite possibly be the fact that he witnesses a homosexual couple.

After the kissing scene, the events in the video take a turn. The tempo of the shots changes; in the earlier part of the video, the scenes changed in a calm manner, and, for instance, the movements portrayed by the characters were unrushed. The change in the tempo is accompanied by the change

in the music as the chorus starts, which cause the atmosphere to intensify. The events may seem even a bit confusing and disorganized at first, as the shots change quickly. After the kiss that was shared by the couple, a group of marching men is portrayed (Figures 10 and 11), followed by man 1 first frantically searching for the box that was shown before in the video. The man is shown, again, to bury the box under the ground. The group of men in the video are shown to walk confidently towards something, and one of the men can be identified as the same character that witnessed the kiss earlier in the video. The group of men could be described as a ‘gang’ because of their clothing; all of them are wearing hoods on their heads and their faces are covered with scarves. Thus, their identities are somewhat hidden, which is why their choice of clothing could be described as suspicious and even threatening.

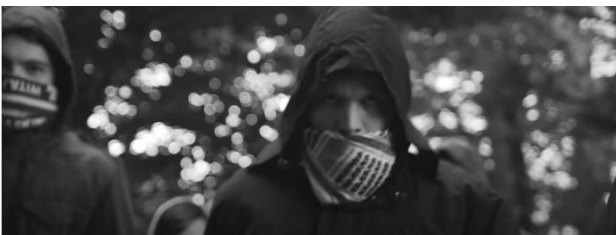


Figure 10



Figure 11

The shots change quickly between two scenes, and it appears that the events take place at the same time but in different locations; as the group of men is marching, man 1 hastily hides the box and is then shown running. His body language and expressions imply rush and panic (Figures 12 and 13), as opposed to the gang members’ determined stance (Figure 11)



Figure 12



Figure 13

As the second verse of the song begins, a shot of a television is portrayed in the music video. On the television, a group of people is shown partaking in what seems to be a rally or a protest: they are walking on a street, carrying banners and a flag (Figure 14).

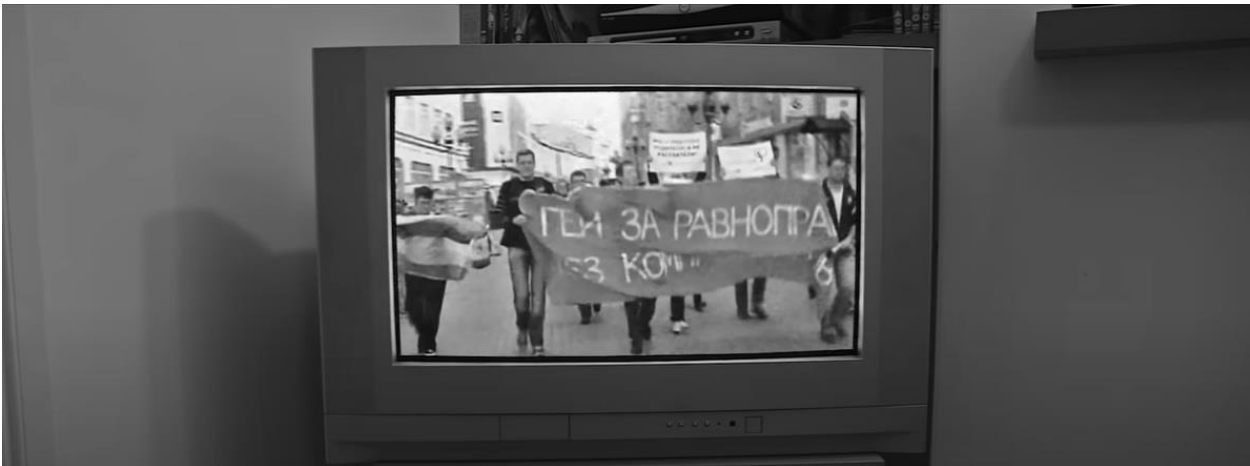


Figure 14

Because the music video is shot in black and white, it is difficult to determine what the flag stands for. Interestingly, the text on the banner in the foreground is in Russian, which is the first clear sign that the events in the music video take place in Russia. The program on the television could be, for instance, the news, reporting a protest that has happened. The text on the banner translates to “Gays for equality without compromise” in English, suggesting that it is from a gay rights protest in Russia.

The music video continues to portray the homosexual couple spending time together while the gang members approach a house. An elder man, who is probably the father or man 1, is shown to look out of the window to see the gang members in the yard just before one of them tosses a Molotov cocktail through the window (Figure 15). The gang breaks into the house and physically assaults the elder man (Figure 16). The events occur as the chorus starts, which assists in building the tension of the upcoming events.



Figure 15

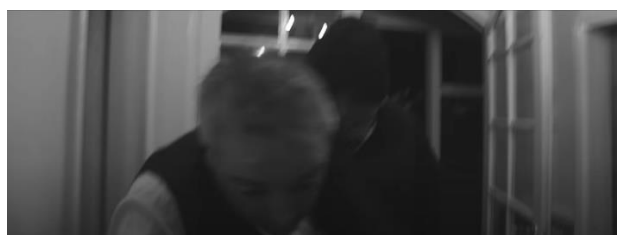


Figure 16

The gang members are shown to examine the house as they are looking for something. Simultaneously, the music video jumps back and forth between different shots and events, one of which portrays the homosexual couple kissing and another showing man 2 hurriedly running through the woods, searching for something. The shots might portray three different periods of time: past, present, and future. The kissing scene most likely happened in the past, the gang members raiding the

house is currently occurring, and the man 2 running through the woods searching for something is about to happen in the near future on the timeline of the music video.

In the next scene, as the song switches to the bridge, the gang members are shown to forcefully drag man 1 through the woods (Figure 17). Man 1 is clearly trying to fight back, and his expression is panicked and fearful (Figure 18). The scene lasts for 17 seconds, and the events are shown from multiple camera angles, which intensifies the struggle of Man 1.



Figure 17



Figure 18

The next scenes clarify the events: Man 2 is portrayed showing up to the house that was raided by the gang members earlier. At this point it is safe to assume that the house belongs to Man 1 and his family. Man 2 searches through the house and runs outside to the yard to an outbuilding or possibly a stable, where he jumps up to a dividing wall. This short wall is probably the one that was portrayed in the beginning of the video, where Man 1 reached out to it to grab the box. Thus, it seems that Man 2 is searching for that box (Figure 19), only to notice that it is not there anymore, as Man 1 had already picked it up and buried it before. After noticing this, Man 2 hurries outside to the yard to find the hole in the ground that Man 1 dug for the box. However, the box has already been dug up again (Figure 20). After seeing this, Man 2 seems disappointed and agitated as he starts running into the woods. It seems safe to assume that he is looking for his partner who was captured by the gang members only moments before.



Figure 19



Figure 20

The next scene cuts back to Man 1 being dragged by the gang members. One of them lights up a flare as they advance as a parade (Figure 21). They approach a campfire, which is likely to be the same one that was pictured in the beginning of the video (Figure 22).



Figure 21



Figure 22

Man 1 is held captive by the gang members as they arrive to the campfire. He is threatened with a knife (Figure 23), while one of the gang members, the first one that was shown in the music video, confronts him: he is holding the box and seems to be either interrogating man 1 about it or just simply shouting at him. At this point it is established that the gang members arrived at the house looking for not only man 1, but probably the box as well, and that they dug it up.



Figure 23

As man 1 is held captive and questioned by one of the gang members, another one of them is filming the assault (Figure 24). The struggle, discomfort, and fear that man 1 is experiencing in the situation are clearly seen on the camera. He is still trying to resist the gang members and trying to escape, although the situation seems hopeless for him. The filming of the events refers to Russian anti-gay propaganda laws, which evoked organized attacks against gay people. These attacks were often filmed and posted on the social media, perhaps in order to shame gay people and/or to ‘out’ them.



Figure 24

The box becomes the center of attention again, as one of the gang members tries to open it or destroy it with a crowbar (Figures 25 and 26). However, man 1 locked it tightly with large chains in the beginning of the video, and it does not budge despite their efforts.



Figure 25



Figure 26

Man 1 is held down by two gang members and forced to witness the events as a spectator, unable to act on it (Figure 27). Because of being unable to open the box, the gang member tosses it in the campfire, which seems to be the same scene that was portrayed in the beginning of the music video (Figure 28).



Figure 27



Figure 28

As the song ends, the box is shown burning in the campfire. It is still locked up with chains and unopened. Only then man 2 arrives at the scene to witness the events (Figure 29).



Figure 29

As seen in the Figure 29, the events have resulted in a violent physical assault towards man 1: he is shown lying on the ground immobile as the gang members kick him. The music video ends with man 2 observing the assault happening. In a way, the music video comes a full circle, ending in the same situation that it began, and everything in between explaining what lead to this situation. However, a lot is left open to interpretation as well. For instance, the contents of the box are not specified at any point, which suggests that the box may be a metaphor to something else, possibly to something immaterial. Since the box and its contents are carefully protected and hidden, it seems that it is something that the men wish to keep a secret between themselves, for instance the romantic and sexual nature of their relationship. The fact that the gang members dug up the box and attempted to force it open supports this interpretation: the men wanted to keep their relationship and sexual orientation a secret, burying it underground and securing it with chains and locks. They might have felt shame or even fear of how others would react, and their fear became true as soon as the box was found.

4.3 The relationship between the lyrics and the video

After conducting analyses to both the song lyrics and the music video to *Take Me to Church*, I wish to examine the relationship between them further. For instance, what do they have in common and what kinds of differences there are between them? Do they complement each other successfully? Is it possible to find new ideas or interpretations when they are observed side by side?

In summary, the song lyrics seem to tell a story about a romantic and sexual relationship that is for some reason considered inconvenient and forbidden. It is clearly stated in the lyrics that the relationship between the singer and this other person, his 'lover', is frowned upon by other people. The attitudes towards their relationship are described as judgmental and disapproving. However, the reason for the attitudes is not clearly specified in the lyrics. The music video also tells a story of a romantic and sexual relationship but in the music video, it seems that the relationship of the two men is not approved because of their sexual orientation. The events portrayed in the music video ultimately lead to a homophobic assault between one of the gay characters and the 'others', in this case the gang members. Nevertheless, the sense and the idea of '*otherness*' are extremely present in both of the media: the characters are distinctly divided into two groups, 'us' and 'them', and in both cases the dichotomy causes problems and altercations. In addition, the two parties are not equal to each other, but one of them ('they/them') is presented as superior, whereas the other ('I/we/us') is oppressed by them. Thus, *oppression* is another theme to appear in both adaptations.

Thus, the theme and the setting of the song lyrics and the music video are very similar, but interestingly, the song lyrics do not mention homosexuality or homophobia directly. Although presenting similar issues, for instance oppression and otherness, are discussed in the lyrics, it is suggested that the narrative is about a heterosexual couple. This is mainly because the male singer addresses his 'lover' as a female. In a way, it could be argued that this is one of the main differences between the lyrics and the video and that there is inconsistency between the two media adaptations: they seem to be telling two different stories about two different situations.

However, it might be worthwhile to adapt another perspective to the interpretation as well: although the lyrics and the video do not coincide perfectly, they unarguably deal with similar issues. Those issues are the unifying factor between them. Because the song lyrics were written first and the music video was published after, it could be argued that the music video presents an example of how those issues appear and occur in a 'real-life' setting. This interpretation would, in fact, bring the two media

together and create a more comprehensive and extensive description of the prejudices and issues that both straight and gay individuals may encounter. In a way, it would mean that the combination of the lyrics and the video could be critique of making people feel as if they do not belong and discriminating against people on a general level. It could be said that this sort of idea normalizes different kinds of sexuality and suggests that we have a lot in common despite our sexualities or, on the other hand, that it undermines the struggle and trouble that homosexual individuals encounter only because of their sexuality.

It could be said that the song lyrics and the music video are both about love, sex, and sexuality, whether heterosexual or homosexual, as well as discrimination and judgment. The music video, however, brings the attention to homosexuality and gay experience, which is why the song lyrics are easily interpreted through the same perspective. All in all, the song lyrics seem to correspond to experiencing homophobic attitudes. The connection is especially easy to see in the line that refers to being born 'sick': homosexuality was, and in some cases still is, often viewed as a disease or a sort of a mental illness, or at least as something that people should try to avoid or get rid of. The debate is, in some parts of the world and in some organizations, on-going. Hozier-Byrne has confirmed that the song is especially addressed to the Catholic Church (Greene, 2015). Indeed, the song lyrics contain a vast number of religious and biblical references and should be read as a critique to organized religions that attempt to restrain sexuality. Especially the Catholic Church's teachings and the *Catechism* officially pronounce homosexual behavior as "acts of grave depravity" and "intrinsically disordered". Because of this, it could also be argued that the song lyrics deal with homosexuality as well as heterosexuality, although it is not clarified in the lyrics.

Interestingly, the music video adapts a different approach to the same issues, leaving out religious aspects. Whereas the lyrics are overflowing with religious imagery and references, none are seen in the music video. Compared to the song lyrics, the music video concentrates on the societal and political forms of homophobia as well as shame and discrimination regarding homosexuality. Because of this, the lyrics and the video could be viewed as a bit disconnected from one another. The events portrayed in the music video take place in Russia, which is infamous for state oppression towards gay people. As Hozier-Byrne has confirmed, the social and political environment and movements against gay people, especially the 2013 'gay propaganda' law in Russia partially inspired the song and the music video. In a way, the song lyrics and the music video combined address both the religious and political aspects of aversion to homosexuality: the oppression and discrimination are similar in both

cases, and they happen in different places, whether they are motivated by religious organizations or politics.

5 Discussion and conclusion

In my thesis, I have examined the song lyrics and the music video to Hozier's *Take Me to Church* with the help of interviews with Hozier-Byrne, Queer theory, and familiarizing myself with the teachings of the Catholic Church and, to an extent, anti-gay politics in Russia. My primary purpose was to explore the ways in which *Take Me to Church* addresses sexuality in general, homosexuality, homophobia, and the problematic relationship between the Catholic Church and sexuality. I hoped to find out how these complex themes and ideas appeared in both the song lyrics and in the music video to *Take Me to Church*. However, a political aspect of homophobia had to be included as well because of the music video.

Based on the analysis and interpretation presented in this thesis, *Take Me to Church* is an emotional and thought-provoking song about what it is to love another person in an environment that is not accepting of the love. The ambiguity of the lyrics enables a double reading when combined with the music video: it can be applied to both homosexual and heterosexual relationships, as the song lyrics discuss love and sexuality on a general level. In fact, the song lyrics address a relationship between the male singer and his female lover that is somehow forbidden and frowned upon by others, whereas the music video concentrates on a same-sex couple. As explained before, *Take Me to Church* was inspired by Hozier-Byrne's frustration with organized religion and more precisely with the Catholic Church, as well as the political anti-gay movements in Russia. As a result, *Take Me to Church* criticizes both religious and political restriction of love and sexuality, suggesting that they are not only a natural, but also a crucial part of humanity and the human experience. As Hozier-Byrne explains in an interview, the song

“...is essentially about sex, but it's a tongue-in-cheek attack at organizations that would ... well, it's about sex and it's about humanity, and obviously sex and humanity are incredibly tied. Sexuality, and sexual orientation — regardless of orientation — is just natural.”
(Shepherd, 2014).

Thus, according to the message of the song and Hozier-Byrne, sexuality cannot and should not be separated from being a human, although different organizations throughout time have attempted to

do so through their teachings, laws, doctrines, and other tools such as discrimination and shame. *Take Me to Church* accuses these kinds of organizations of hypocrisy as well as challenges their views.

Other themes to the song and the music video that I was able to find are the concepts of otherness and oppression. People who are sexually active as well as people of different sexual orientations are often categorized and discriminated against by different organizations. *Take Me to Church* is a critique to such othering and can be interpreted as a celebration of individuality and difference. According to Hozier-Byrne, the song is about "...asserting yourself and reclaiming your humanity through an act of love" (Shepherd, 2014). The main themes of *Take Me to Church* seems to be following: how can something as beautiful and natural as love be wrong or forbidden? In addition, how can an expression of love, sex, be considered 'sinful'? And what difference does the sexual orientation make? With *Take Me to Church*, Hozier-Byrne pleads his case on freedom to love and express love, as well as the connection between humanity and sexuality regardless of orientation.

The most evident limitation of my thesis, analysis, and findings is that they are only based on my observations and interpretations, which is why it could be argued that it is quite possible that my personal experiences and ideologies might affect the results. However, this is the case in most literary analyses, and knowing this limitation, I was able to make sure that in addition to my own interpretations, I also gathered as much information and ideas suggested by other parties and from different perspectives. In addition, *Take Me to Church* is, ultimately, about human rights, and human rights are not a matter of opinion, even if there might be various perspectives on what exactly qualifies as a human right.

Another limitation of the thesis was the fact that academic research has not been conducted on popular music extensively, which is why there is no coherent theory on how it should be done. However, *Take Me to Church* is only one example of the fact that popular music and song lyrics may carry socially meaningful messages, which is why they could and should be researched more in the future. For instance, it would be both interesting and worthwhile to interpret other popular music songs that discuss social and political issues and to compare them to one another: that way, it could be possible to achieve a greater understanding on how and why these issues manifest in today's popular culture.

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